

# ROMAN CULTURE: AN ESSAY

By Paul MacKendrick

*Others, no doubt, will better mould the bronze  
To the semblance of soft breathing, draw from marble  
The living countenance; and others plead  
With greater eloquence, or learn to measure,  
Better than we, the pathways of the heaven,  
The risings of the stars: remember, Roman,  
To rule the people under law, to establish  
The way of peace, to battle down the haughty,  
To spare the meek. Our fine arts, these, forever.*

—AENEID, VI, 847-853

VERGIL's statement of Rome's mission sets up a sort of delimitation agreement: the Greeks will practise the "theoretical" arts and sciences, the Romans the "practical." If this statement of the distinction between Greek and Roman culture is sound, two conclusions follow: first, that we shall expect Roman literature—employing Horace's distinction—to be more useful than beautiful; and second, that for the understanding of Roman literature an acquaintance with its geographical, historical, economic, and intellectual background is of even greater importance than in the case of Greece. Such an analysis is in two respects of peculiar interest to us, the heirs of the democratic American tradition, because it reveals the profoundly aristocratic bias of most Roman literature, and because it suggests a number of striking analogies between the development of Rome and that of the United States.

The great boot<sup>1</sup> of the peninsula of Italy stretches from the Alps for seven hundred miles into the Mediterranean; in area it is somewhat larger than New England, in climate it ranges from north temperate to subtropical, with corresponding influences upon the nature of crops and people. The Alps form a mountain wall to the north; the Apennines form the great backbone of the peninsula. In the north, too, the rich bottom lands of the Po valley afford a soil richer in grain than anything in Greece; the mountain

valleys are softened by grey-green olive trees, and the slopes are terraced for the growing of grapes. So the "Mediterranean triad" (grain, the vine, and the olive) grows in such abundance that the importation of foodstuffs did not become necessary until, in the fourth century B.C., the large landowners began—as in sixteenth-century England—to convert productive farm land into more profitable sheep and cattle ranches. Since the harbors are better and the coastal plain wider and more fertile on the west coast than the east, Italy faces west geographically and economically: the opposite way from Greece, a fact which has its bearing upon the Romanization of the western European culture in which all Americans share.

Vergil in his *Georgics* expresses the love which Italians feel for this land of brown plain, purple mountain, blue water, and ancient hill towns perched on inaccessible crags with rivers gliding along below the ancient walls. But Italy's finest crop, he says, is *men*: the descendants of two waves of prehistoric invaders like those who overran Greece: one of the mysterious Etruscans, who came probably from Asia Minor and made significant contributions to Roman politics, religion, arts, and the development of the Roman alphabet in which these words are written; and the other of the Greek colonists of South Italy and Sicily in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. Like American culture, Roman culture is the product



of a borrowing from all these diverse racial stocks without loss of a distinctive personality of its own. Because of this adaptability, and because of its strategic location, the city of Rome, on its seven hills, well up river from the danger of pirates on the seacoast, early became the most important market town in Italy, and began the growth we are to study, from a village of huts to a marble metropolis of a million souls, the ruler of the whole civilized world.

Roman historians divided Rome's history into three periods: the monarchy (753-509 B.C.), the Republic (509-27 B.C.), and the Empire (27 B.C. to A.D. 476).

The history of the monarchy is largely legend, manufactured by the pro-aristocratic historians and poets of later times, like Livy and Vergil, to lengthen the pedigree of their heroes. Every nation cherishes its folklore about its origins, and Romans were as fond of the tales of Romulus, Remus, and the wolf, or Horatius at the bridge as Americans are of Parson Weems' pious fictions about George Washington and the cherry tree, which are about equally well founded on fact. According to the version of the legend which prevailed in the Augustan age, Rome was founded by refugees from the Trojan War, led by Aeneas, a minor figure in the *Iliad*. But since the traditional date of the fall of Troy was 1183 B.C., while that of the founding of Rome was 753, some device had to be found to fill the gap; a series of native kings was invented, culminating in the famous twins, Romulus and Remus. Six other kings followed, until finally the aristocracy, unable to brook the harshness of the last king, Tarquin the Proud, unseated him, "liberated" Rome, and set up a republic, their ringleader being Lucius Junius Brutus, an ancestor of the "liberator," Marcus Brutus, who led the assassins of Julius Caesar.

In point of fact the republic of 509 was the product of the dissatisfaction of the Roman aristocrats—the "patricians" or "optimates"—with the monarchy, and was not in any sense a democracy such as a Greek of the age of Pericles or a modern American would recognize. It contained a majority—the "plebs"—which was without pedigree, wealth, or privilege, and the history of the Roman republic is the story of the jockeying for power of these two classes. Though it is not clear whether the patricians were the original

settlers of Rome, a group of invaders, or a king-made aristocracy, what is clear is that in historical times they had under the Roman constitution—which was actually the governing class—a monopoly of wealth and power which they did not always use to the advantage of the community as a whole.

At its outset the Roman republic gave its poorer or less well-born citizens no appeal from the decisions of the aristocratic magistrates, no opportunity to acquire property in land, no relief from debt, and no access to the highest office, the annual double magistracy called the consulship. Their sole safeguard was in the office of tribune, against which Cicero inveighs so subtly in his treatise *On the Laws*. The tribunes, plebeians by birth, and guaranteed immunity during their year of office, had the duty of protecting the plebs from unjust treatment by interposing their veto upon the act of any other magistrate.

The first stage in the gradual emancipation of the plebs was marked by the codification of the law in the famous Twelve Tables (451 B.C.). Before this date knowledge of the provisions of the law was restricted to the patrician magistrates who administered it. The new-found knowledge was bitter to the plebs, for the law was harsh and inequitable, being designed to protect the propertied class against the rest of the community, but at least they now knew the worst, and could proceed to countermeasures. Meanwhile the Tables became the basis for the massive structure of Roman law under which much of western Europe, and even our own state of Louisiana, are still governed, and to the interpretation of which many of the best minds of the next two thousand years were to be devoted.

To express their dissatisfaction with the *status quo* the plebs resorted to the device of "secession," and formal withdrawal from the political and economic life of the community, which bears a certain resemblance to the modern strike. By this means they obtained for themselves an assembly of their own, through which they were able to gain successively an increase in the number of their tribunes, the right to intermarry with patricians, access to minor offices, and finally, by 366 B.C., the privilege of standing for the consulship, ostensibly on equal terms with the aristocracy. But plebeians in power soon began to show the normal human tendency to kick



away the ladder by which they had climbed, and the result of two hundred years of struggle was a combination of wealthy plebeians with patricians to reserve for themselves political, economic, and social power and prestige.

Meanwhile economic progress had not accompanied political. The territorial expansion of Rome which was going on throughout this period was made possible by a plebeian army with patrician commanders, who kept the lion's share of the new land won in war. This land they farmed economically on a large scale with slave labor, driving the small farmer out of the market, forcing him to mortgage his farm, foreclosing like the flinty squire in Horatio Alger, and adding the land thus acquired to their already enormous acreage. The displaced persons thus created drifted to Rome where they formed an unemployed urban proletariat, whose votes were for sale to the highest bidder. This is the situation Sallust protests against in many of the brilliant speeches in his *Jugurtha* and *Catiline*; there was no permanent solution for it without the abolition of slavery, which no Roman seems ever to have proposed.

The parallel between the expansion of Rome and that of the United States is the more striking because it was made possible by the same virtues and resulted in the same vices: on the one hand rugged individualism, self-denial, and ability to bear up under hardship; on the other hand, irresponsibility, the cash nexus, and eventual softening of fibre. But the Romans themselves postponed the date of the decline to the time of the destruction of Carthage (146 B.C.); over one hundred years earlier Rome had become mistress of all Italy south of the Po, using in the process tactics not much less cruel than those involved in the winning of our own West. The territory thus won was administered in a variety of ways, ranging from full citizenship through local self-government, colonial status, and treaties of alliance. Resentment over exclusion from Roman citizenship, often refused through the shortsightedness of the landed gentry, was to be responsible for a bloody war in the last century of the republic.

The expansion of Rome had brought her into contact with Greek culture. Of Roman literature before the end of the third century B.C. we have only fragments, but they are enough to show that

the Roman genius, if it had been left to develop independently, might have forged a literature worthy to stand beside any in Europe. But the Romans apparently felt a provincial sense of inferiority before the sophisticated Greeks, as Englishmen of Chaucer's time felt before the French, and Americans earlier than Whitman before the English. Further, the Greeks themselves put no premium on originality. At the time Rome came into contact with Greek culture, the Isocra-tean theory of imitation prevailed; the aim was not independent self-expression, but to write "what oft was said, but ne'er so well expressed." The result was, as Horace later put it, that "captive Greece led captive her fierce conqueror, and sophistication was imported into rustic Latium."

But before Roman aristocrats were to have leisure to enjoy that sophistication, which critics like Sallust said had proved Rome's ruin, nearly 150 years of struggle had yet to be faced, with the great Semitic commercial state of Carthage, in North Africa. Livy, writing under Augustus of Rome's great days, tells the story of the epic struggle between the wily Carthaginian Hannibal and the Roman aristocrat Fabius Maximus, from whose delaying tactics George Washington was to learn much which he applied to his advantage during the darkest days of the American Revolution. At the end of the struggle (146 B.C.) Carthage lay prostrate, and Rome had added to her territory Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Spain, and North Africa. Greece, which was declared "liberated" in 196 B.C. from Macedon, became a Roman province in the same year as the fall of Carthage; a large part of Asia Minor fell into Roman hands as a legacy from a puppet king in 133 B.C., and southern France was made a province in 120.

This enormous expansion brought, at least to the ruling class, prosperity and leisure; no longer was it true, as it had been when Carthaginian ambassadors visited Rome in the middle of the third century, that there was only one silver service in the whole city. Victorious generals brought home works of art they generally did not understand, and embassies of Greek intellectuals amazed the Romans with their versatility and erudition. Plautus, the Umbrian comic poet, is the first writer in Latin whose work survives in quantity. We have twenty plays, all from Greek originals of the so-called New Comedy,



whose standard types were derived from Aristotle through the *Characters* of his pupil Theophrastus.

A generation later Roman aristocratic audiences were smiling with well-bred reserve at the comedies of Terence; the plebs preferred bear-baiting and tight-rope walkers. Terence was a member of an aristocratic literary and political coterie which centered around the person of Rome's greatest aristocratic hero, the symbol to Cicero of the Golden Age, Scipio Africanus Minor. The group also included the historian Polybius (whose analysis of the Roman constitution as a system of checks and balances impressed American Federalists); the Stoic philosopher Panaetius, from whom Cicero later borrowed heavily for his work *On Duty*; the satirist Lucilius; and the jurist Laelius, Cicero's hero in his essay *On Friendship*. It thus controlled all propaganda in the interest of the aristocratic regime, but Scipio's death in 129 B.C. under mysterious and sinister circumstances symbolized a revolt against conservative control and ushered in a bloody century which culminated in 27 B.C. with the establishment of the Augustan principate.

The points at issue between patricians and plebeians were much the same as they had been in the days of the secessions of the plebs: redistribution of public land as a solution for urban unemployment, relief for the small farmer, citizenship for the Italian allies. But the balance of power between the two classes was now held by a group of wealthy bankers, wholesale merchants, and tax farmers, called "knights," who were not eligible for membership in the Senate because their ancestors had not held high public office. To this class Cicero belonged, and he worked hard to make a coalition between it and the patrician Senate. Chief representatives of the conservative faction in this century, standing against land reform, relief, and broadening of the citizenship base, were Scipio Nasica, Sulla, Pompey, and Cicero; the great names of the opposition include the brothers Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, Sallust's hero Marius, Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony. The defeat of the latter and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium (31 B.C.) by Julius Caesar's young nephew and heir, Octavian, later surnamed Augustus, was represented as a victory of West over East, after which Romans of

all parties could join in self-congratulation. Perhaps the fact that young Cicero, the addressee of the work *On Duty*, served the year after Actium as consul under his father's enemy, may stand as a symbol of the new spirit of reconciliation.

Party strife enlisted all the resources of literature. Cicero's speeches, letters, and philosophical works provide a conservative history of Rome, to which Sallust's monographs are in part a counterweight. The dualistic philosophy of Plato and the Stoics, with its emphasis on a hierarchy of nature, a Great Chain of Being, culminating in human reason, was used to justify conservative government. While it is not clear that the philosopher poet Lucretius took part in politics, the atomic theory of the universe for which he stood did not allow for preference of one atom over another, nor for the point of view that intellectual pleasure is too precious a thing to be wasted on the lower classes; hence, in part, the diatribes against Epicureanism in Cicero's philosophical works. The lyric poet Catullus' mistress was the sister of Cicero's most implacable enemy, and Catullus himself wrote lampoons against Julius Caesar; Horace, poet and satirist, who had been a conservative at Philippi, wrote lukewarm propaganda for the Augustan regime; Vergil, out of his love for Greek literature and the Italian countryside, rose to the grandest heights of poetry of which any Roman had yet proved himself capable, as he sang in the *Aeneid* of the destiny of Rome and the pathos of human existence. Livy in a monumental work of nearly 150 volumes told Rome's story in prose, and Augustus himself—or his stepson—recorded his exploits in the monumental terseness of the inscription, in Greek and Latin, known as the *Res Gestae* or *Deeds of the Deified Augustus*.

The divinity of the ruler had long been an acceptable part of Oriental monarchy, and had come into the Greek world at the time of Alexander the Great. Augustus used it as a political device, largely in the East, specifying that no Roman citizen was to be required to worship him as a god. But Augustus and his literary circle were deeply interested in a revival of Roman religion. The natural businesslike tendency of the state cult had caused it to be so manipulated by aristocratic priests in the interests of partisan politics that Cicero had said he did not see how one priest could meet another and keep a straight



face. The religion of the aristocracy in Cicero's time was one sect or another of Greek philosophy; <sup>2</sup> the religious sense of the common people was deeply stirred by the importation of various revivalist cults from the East, notably those of the Great Mother, Dionysus, Isis, and Mithras, which with their drama of death and rebirth prepared the way for Christianity. The Augustan revival appealed to antiquarians and lovers of the quaint rites of the Italian countryside, upon which Augustus, by means of wholesale evictions, was attempting to settle his veterans. Even the most frivolous poets of the Augustan Age are eloquent in their descriptions of rustic festival, the processions to crown the boundary stones with garlands, the simple sacrifices of milk and wine. Roman religion as a whole was even more derivative than Roman literature: the twelve major gods were identified, or "syncretized," with their Greek equivalents; the practice of observing the flights of birds, inspecting the livers of animals, and applying to human life the movements of the stars came from Babylonia and Chaldaea. The native Italic element persisted and was appealed to by the Augustan revival of animism, a belief in innumerable spirits who dwelt in the groves, fountains, and brooks, in the hearth and the larder, and who would fulfill their part of the contract with man by bringing him prosperity if he would fulfill his part by bringing them offerings, a religious attitude which by no means declined and fell with the Roman Empire.

In emperor-worship, as it finally established itself in Italy as well as in the provinces, the people of a far-flung empire found a sense of unity, of a stake in the nation, which had been lacking in the old aristocratic regime. That had been a closed corporation of aristocratic families, with a sense of extremely limited liability to promote the general welfare. In the opinion of Cicero, spokesman for the optimates, the business of the aristocrat is to govern, that of the plebeian is to know and keep his place. As in the history of our own republic, the problems were economic and social ones for which liberals, from the Gracchi to Julius Caesar, had sought a political solution. All three branches of the government, the executive, the legislative, and the judicial, were, in Cicero's consulship (63 B.C.) in the hands of the optimates, and Cicero and his

friends intended to keep them there. An electoral system which concentrated two-thirds of the votes in the hands of one-fourth of the population made bribery relatively easy, and what it cost a man to get himself elected consul he could get back by extortionate tax-collecting when he went out the following year to govern his province. Even Cicero, who was an honest man, cleared \$110,000 in a single year in Cilicia, and Julius Caesar, liberal though he was, was said to have made \$40,000,000 out of the conquest of Gaul. After his term as consul the aristocrat would move in the highest ranks of the Senate, which was neither an annual nor an elective body, but a self-perpetuating oligarchical cabal which for centuries preserved by dynastic intermarriages its privileged position and its vested interest in the *status quo*. The Roman constitution made no provision for a "loyal opposition"; the permanent reservoir of all political power and experience was in the ruling class, and the plebs could expect no attention to their interests save from "traitors" to that class like the Gracchi and Julius Caesar. The popular assemblies could neither initiate, discuss, nor amend proposed legislation: they could only cast ballots for magistrates whom they had not nominated, and vote yea or nay on bills proposed by the Senate. This is the government which Cicero in his *Republic* and *Laws* describes as the ideal state. In theory it represented a balance of power; in practice it was so close an oligarchy that in 115 B.C. two thousand landowners held the privilege of public office over 394,000 citizens, and thereby controlled diplomacy, commissions in the armed forces, the treasury, and the bench. They exploited conquered countries so that for well over a century the capitalist class had no capital tax to pay, and they had no interest in weakening their control by broadening the citizenship base. The system survived only because the Roman plebs were broken to discipline and were traditionally respectful of social authority. But the rise of the commercial bourgeoisie (the "knights") challenged the power of the optimates and brought about the Augustan principate.<sup>3</sup>

For the only choice was between voluntary social and economic reform initiated by the conservative class, or one-man rule. When Julius Caesar attempted these reforms as dictator, his



assassination was represented as the "liberation" of the "republic" from a "tyranny," but it may equally well be viewed as the "murder" of a "friend of the people" by "vested interests." But Brutus and Cassius reckoned without Caesar's veterans, a citizen army which since Marius had held the whip hand, so that it was to become increasingly true that he who controlled the army controlled the state. The veterans sided with Antony and Octavian; the result was a compromise in which liberty, which had never been more than a concept to the Roman masses, was sacrificed to security, efficiency, and the Roman peace. The Senate was packed with partisans of Octavian, the key provinces were put under his control, and were supervised, budgeted, ruled by his appointees with limited power, and on the whole honestly administered. The problem of land grants and unemployment was in part met by the practice already mentioned, of settling the veterans on land confiscated from the opposition. So the ambition and feuding of the optimates destroyed a spurious republic and made forever impossible true democratic freedom for the Roman people.

Augustus boasted that he had found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble. Though his boast was made considerably easier to fulfill by the comparatively simple device of laying thin marble veneer over existing brick construction, it is true that Rome in his lifetime became the architectural rival of Periclean Athens. Vergil's description of the rise of Dido's Carthage, with the workmen swarming like bees, reflects the busy activity of the building program of Augustan Rome. In the plastic arts, except for the fine realistic portrait busts of the hard-headed and ruthless men of affairs of the last century of the republic, Romans had not been distinguished, for reasons of some importance for Americans: imitation sapped their creative originality, and the material expansion of the state seemed of more importance than art. But in the practical sciences of architecture and engineering the Romans had no peers. They were pioneers in the development of concrete, the arch, the vault and the dome; their military roads, stretching perfectly straight for miles across Europe, supplied the fastest and most comfortable transport Europe was to know until the nineteenth century, and indeed in some places are still in use today.

The Altar of Peace and the temple of the Palatine Apollo did not compete aesthetically with the Parthenon frieze or the Erechtheum, but they have the monumental quality which symbolizes the grandeur and the dignity of the Roman Empire. And all over the provinces, from Syria to Spain, from Britain to the edge of the Sahara, roads, temples, aqueducts, and amphitheatres testified to the unity, efficiency, and contentment, if not the liberty, of one world.

In the intellectual history of Rome, the prosperity and peace of Augustus' reign passes as the symptom of a "Golden" Age, comparable to the vitality of Periclean Athens or Elizabethan England. But the vision of greatness in Horace's "Roman Odes," Vergil's epic, Livy's history, and the *Res Gestae* is clouded in each case but the last by pessimistic reservations about the low state of public morality, the ruthlessness that is the price of Empire, and the degeneration of Romans from the high standards of virtue set by their ancestors. In short, the "Golden" Age contains within it the seeds of a "Silver" Age in the succeeding century, characterized by less sureness of touch, less supreme confidence in the future, and a general sense of failure of nerve. So in the first century A.D. in Rome, as in the fourth century B.C. in Athens, or the twentieth in the United States, there was bred in creative artists a sense of beginning decline, manifest in a spirit of nagging criticism and nostalgia for the past. There is a stage in the life of a society when criticism is healthy; that of the early Roman Empire is carping and destructive, fit prelude to a decline and fall. The pessimistic spirit was not relieved by any hopes engendered by the birth of a child in a manger in Bethlehem: Palestine was an obscure province; the earliest Christians were humble people; and the crucifixion of an alleged King of the Jews under the reign of Tiberius was a routine incident in the frontier administration of a bored Pontius Pilate. The early church forged a correspondence between the Stoic philosopher Seneca and St. Paul, but there is no evidence that they knew each other. The historian Tacitus confuses the Christians with the Jews, refers to them as "the enemies of the human race," and reports sinister allegations of mysterious atrocities in their rites; Tacitus' friend Pliny the Younger is chiefly interested in their paying lip-service to the Emperor Trajan



as a god, and regards their faith as stubbornness and insanity. Meanwhile Seneca's tragedies were demonstrating the sterility of Stoicism as a rival creed; Petronius' novel, with its Babbitt for hero, was underlining the emptiness of material satisfactions; the satirist Juvenal's savage indignation was lashing at the vices of noblewomen and noblemen amid the confusion and alarms of a teeming metropolis, and Tacitus was drawing with Hogarthian strokes the picture of a conscienceless tyrant who used Christians as torches to light his garden parties. And to the north lay the threat of the German tribes, so noble, so savage, and so pure, whose descendants in 410 were to dictate terms of surrender to a humbled Rome.

The keynote of "Silver" literature is rhetorical excess, fostered by the practice of authors in reading their works for the applause of coached audiences, and by the unreality of the current educational system, which, following the Sophists of fifth century Athens, stressed the ability to make the worse appear the better reason, to embroider paradoxes, to attribute sinister motives to historical characters, and to debate impossible hypothetical cases. As in Greece, education was neither free nor public, but it was cheap, so that schoolmasters, usually Greek and often slaves, were ill paid and despised, as now. Americans will be interested to note that the earliest Roman schools were coeducational, as they never were in Greece. Education was intended to be practical, inculcating discipline, knowledge of the law, respect for authority, and propriety of conduct as well as the three R's. The Roman common people were the most literate in the world, as the wall inscriptions (*graffiti*) at Pompeii bear witness, but their formal education stopped at an elementary level, and higher education was class education, the sons of optimates being trained usually under the republic by being attached as law clerks to distinguished jurists. It was here they learned the importance to a future ruler of a broad general education, but its basis was still practical, its end to rule. This general education, coupled with a sense of *noblesse oblige* and an instinct toward sympathy, courtesy, and kindness, was what Cicero meant by *humanitas*, a noble concept which runs the risk of narrowness if snobbishly applied in a democratic age. The end of Roman education in both republic and

empire was to produce a polished orator, but in the empire the orator had nothing to say; hence the emphasis upon artificialities, conceits, antitheses, and quibbles which marks the literature of the "Silver" Age. In the midst of this training there was none of the Greek emphasis upon athletics for their own sake: physical education under the republic was for the sake of efficiency in war, and gymnasiums and wrestling grounds were regarded as effeminate. Tacitus is disgusted with Nero for having encouraged the spread of Greek gymnastics among Roman youth. Later emperors endowed professorial chairs, whose incumbents were not expected to criticize the regime; the educational theorist Quintilian was one of the earliest appointees. Down to the very end of the Empire Greece was the finishing school for Roman aristocratic youth, as Europe has been for Americans; Caesar and Cicero both studied there, and Athens remained important as a university town long after she became politically and economically a backwater. Oxford was not the first home of lost causes.

This education produced the administrators of the one world of the Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> Their method was adaptation, "muddling through." Augustus and his successors pretended to the last that the principate was only a temporary expedient; no regular dynastic succession was ever worked out; the administrative forms of the old city-state were preserved, though sometimes to the point of absurdity (the Emperor Gaius [Caligula] is said to have made his prize race-horse consul). In the provinces, home rule was allowed to work wherever it would, and the Emperor Claudius, though vilified for it by the Bourbons of his time, with wise statesmanship broadened the base of citizenship. The breadth and complexity of the imperial administration inevitably meant the growth of a bureaucracy, the imperial civil service, which more and more placed minor powers in the hands of the bourgeoisie under the growing autocracy of the Emperor and his army. This bureaucracy carried with it all over the Empire an official culture, stereotyped and unimaginative, unable to breathe vitality into the Empire as a unit.

The relation of the emperor to his subjects came more and more to be regarded as the relation of a master to his slaves, and the slaves could be trusted not to revolt so long as the master as-



ured them a good administration, a stable peace, bread, and circuses. Their contentment rendered quixotic the revolts of the aristocratic Stoic opposition, and illusory, as Tacitus knew, the dreams of optimates longing for the dear dead days of the republic. The Senate was the emperor's rubber stamp, the consuls were his nominees, the law was administered by jurists whose licence depended upon his pleasure. The plebs had no political life at all, but derived what sense they had of their own importance from public and private religious associations.

The imperial army, which at its peak numbered 450,000 men, was the largest professional army the world had ever seen, but it was small in comparison to the length of frontier it had to patrol. It was a sort of Foreign Legion, largely recruited on the frontiers for service on the spot: the Roman legionary was usually of the same race as the barbarian who faced him across the wall; at the end of his twenty-year hitch he would marry a woman of his own race, but bring up his children in Roman folkways; the Roman army thus became the greatest single instrument of Romanization of western Europe. The officers were not native; they supplied the link with Rome, and they regarded military service as a career, sometimes, as in the cases of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian, leading to a more or less lengthy tenure of the imperial throne itself. Their enlisted men were given a lump sum or a land grant at discharge; if they chose the latter, it would be passed on to an heir if the heir would promise military service; in this device some historians see the germ of medieval serfdom.

Imperial civil administration was an improvement over that of the republic. The governor was no longer a tax collector; the emperors had enough faith in their administrators to allow the provincials to appeal, if they wished, direct to Rome; and after Claudius (41-54) numbers of provincial senators in Rome represented their province's interests there. (The provinces contributed more and more to the intellectual life of the Empire: Seneca in the first century was a Spaniard, Augustine in the fourth a North African, and there are innumerable other examples.) Local self-government handled everything but the army, appeals, and taxes; the imperial policy, like that of the British in the nineteenth century, was to achieve, with minimum violence

to local usage, a stable local system, easy to run without the need for direct intervention. With the break-up of the Empire, this system fell by default into the hands of the large landowners, and may be regarded as the basis of the medieval feudal or manorial system.

Politically the Empire was unified by the concept of Rome at its centre and the Emperor as its central personality; it was one world-wide family all akin to Rome, as symbolized in Caesar and the bureaucracy that radiated from him. The state was regarded as all-powerful and divine; there was no freedom of speech or religion; no tribunal to judge between the state and the individual; all jurisdiction was administrative action. A candidate was elected not to carry out a program but to rule. The vote of the individual citizen simply symbolized his obligation to provide a means of extracting from him his own obedience. Economically, the Empire in a typical year ran on a budget of \$30,000,000. Property taxes were used to pay pensions. In return for taxes, the government provided guarantees against piracy and brigandage, and gave to commerce the advantage of a uniform language, coinage, and law, besides subsidizing aqueducts, irrigation projects, harbors, and roads. Both the subsistence level and the population rose in consequence; there were fewer foreclosures, because the government issued mortgages at low interest, the proceeds of which went to support the poor in Rome and Italy. Industry was on a workshop, not a factory basis; there was some nationalization, especially of mines. The massive public buildings in the provinces offer mute evidence that administration was too heavy for local economic life, but the Empire had never depended on a complex international exchange, so that when it broke down in the third century the debacle was not as severe as it was, say, in 1929. Slaves were few and comparatively well treated; freed slaves held high government posts, and were partners and managers in industry. The lot of the urban poor was relieved by public and private welfare funds. Fashion was still set in the cosmopolitan yet close-knit society of the capital at Rome.

The culture of imperial Rome presents a picture of unity in diversity: the government united an infinite variety of races, environments, economic interests, and social classes, which began



to split up into regional cultures as soon as the central administration weakened. Greek was, for example, always a second language; Claudius and Marcus Aurelius wrote in it by preference; the Greek East was a transmission line for Oriental influences, especially Christianity. So when the Empire split, it split in two, and a part of the heritage of Plato and Pericles passed to the Byzantines of Constantinople. The West, on the other hand, had not the consciousness of kind which the Romans had had when they first conquered Greece; attempting to be less provincial, the western provinces conformed to the official culture and thereby impaired its vitality. This official culture stressed comfort, utility, and massiveness; it was flexible, reasonable, comprehensive, and consistent, but it was still a class-culture, with a penalty for subversion so harsh that it suggests, as any such harshness always does, a fundamental lack of faith in its own principles. Petronius, Tacitus, and Juvenal paint a gloomy picture of mediocre morality, with its race suicide, easy divorce, sadistic gloating over cruel spectacles, and crass materialism. There is little evidence of intellectual curiosity, or spirit of adventure and enterprise; the lugubrious succession of suicides in Tacitus bears witness to lowered vitality; the decline and fall may then be ascribed not so much to social corruption or racial degeneration as to failure of intellectual and spiritual energy: pagan philosophy was not deep-rooted in the soil, and twenty generations after Plato it was withered on the branch. Cicero's *humanitas* became a mechanism for preserving class privilege, instead of a motive force, and those who might have welcomed it if its base had been broadened turned, with the hope that springs eternal in the human breast, to what appeared to be the wider promise and warmer welcome of Christianity.

The long story of Rome has its relevance to America. American civilization is European, as Roman civilization was Greek; Americans owe to the Romans, and the Greeks, their alphabet, writing, language, basic mathematics and science, and the dominant concepts and traditions in art and music. Whatever may divide us politically, culturally America and Europe, thanks to Rome, remain one world. The American republic was founded by men steeped in the classics, in which some found an example, others a warning. But

the example of the Roman republic has not sufficed to warn modern man of the dangers of imitation in literature, self-seeking in economic life, money-making as the chief end for man, or conservatism if it reckons without the rights and aspirations of the common man. Nor has the participation of the United States in world-wide empire brought with it, any more than it did to the Romans, a real desire to bridge the gap between the artist and the public, to adjust principles to changing times without compromising their essence, to be constructive rather than destructive critics, or to realize the dangers of social centralization if the individual moral fibre is not strong. The relation of the individual to society is still the central problem; it must be solved by education; the fact that here Greek and Roman education failed does not reduce the problem for modern man. George Santayana defines culture as "the diffusion and dilution of habits arising in privileged centres." It is the duty of the educated man and woman to be vigilant in the constant effort to establish at least provisionally the conditions under which the individual personality may be set free: the "open society" of which only a few Greeks and Romans, as only a few in modern times, have seen the vision.

For clearly the ideal of democracy set by Pericles has not been achieved, none of the classic heroes has saved the world, and the followers of the Christ who taught forbearance, tolerance, and bearing one another's burdens are torchlight for Nero's garden party. Successive study of succeeding ages will show that the goal has not been reached, that sorrow and sighing have not fled away, that the greatest good of the greatest number remains still only a pious aspiration. But the record has not been all failure. There have been flashes of insight and times of greatness; the Gracchi prove that democracy may still be the school of men; Scipio's dream of the rule of reason, tempered by the classical restraint of the Golden Mean and the Stoic-Christian active sympathy for the unfortunate, still gleams before us. Whether it remains a vision, or is translated into vigorous, glowing action here and now, depends on the willingness of this generation to dedicate itself unflinchingly to the unselfish service of our fellow men; in a word, to the other-regarding virtues.



## NOTES

1. The section on geography is summarized from W. C. Greene, *Achievement of Rome* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), by permission of the publishers, the Harvard University Press.

2. In this anthology the Stoics are represented by Cicero, especially in *On the Nature of the Gods*, and by Epictetus.

3. This paragraph is summarized by permission of the publishers from R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939).

4. The section on the empire is summarized by permission of the publishers from S. N. Miller, "The Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries" in E. Eyre, *European Civilization* (Oxford, 1935), Vol. II.